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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which gender may lead to conflict between women superintendents and members of their elected boards of trustees. The report draws on the perspective of three female former superintendents. A qualitative case-study approach was used that relied on indepth interviews and a focus-group interview with all three participants. The results show that the three women described similar scenarios in their school districts: they were selected by a progressive school board that was replaced when opposition grew enough to force them out. The women described gender as a factor in all stages of the evolution of their experiences: gender operated at personal, community, and societal levels with their board members and made it difficult for these board members to support the actions of the female superintendents. None of the women had received training on gender-related issues in their university-preparation programs, and these issues were never discussed with the school boards. The concludes that members of educational institutions must work toward understanding the operation of gender in superintendent-board relations. (Contains 38 references.) (RJM)

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Women Superintendents in Politically Problematic Work Situations:

The Role of Gender in Structuring Conflict

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Women Superintendents in Politically Problematic Work Situations:

The Role of Gender in Structuring Conflict

After four good years, I woke up one morning, and I was "that woman" to everybody. (Amanda Hunter, study participant)

The American public school superintendency is a professional role that has been characterized by conflict and controversy from its inception (Blumberg, 1985). In fact, according to Knezevich (1975), the superintendency is a position born in conflict, given that the role only came into existence in 1837, when the cities of Buffalo and Louisville first established the position of city superintendent, because previous attempts to administer growing school systems had been unsuccessful. This conflicted role is well described by Blumberg (1985):

> The superintendency is not a neat and tidy situation. It is, indeed, quite the opposite and may be conceived of as a conceptually "sloppy" office, if that term can be taken to mean a condition where nothing of consequence is really ever finished; where the unexpected has to be the expected; where the role expectations emerge from conflicting reference groups; and where the character of one's power may be, at the same time, great and miniscule. (p. 12)

Therefore, the "caught in the middle" nature of the superintendency creates a unique set of challenges for anyone who assumes the role. The conflicted nature of this role intensifies even further, however, when the superintendent is non-traditional. By that I mean, in the case of the participants in the study on which is paper is based, the superintendent is non-traditional because she is a woman.

As the vast majority of superintendents have been and continue to be men (93 percent in 1992, according to Glass), the expectations for the role are based on "a taken-for-granted

conception of the superintendent as a middle-aged, conservative, married man" (Bell, 1988, p. 42). Therefore, when the superintendent is a woman, an additional source of conflict—the misalignment between the traditional expectations of a superintendent's leadership based on a male, authoritative model and the traditional expectations of passive femininity—adds fuel to the fire (Beekley, 1994; Bell, 1988; Bell & Chase, 1993; Chase, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1987; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996; Tallerico, Burstyn, & Poole, 1993). To put this another way, borrowing terminology from chemistry, female gender can be looked at as an "accelerator," a substance that speeds a reaction.

This intensifying effect that femaleness has on the conflicted role of the superintendency has only recently begun to be examined by researchers. After decades during which the under-representative numbers of women superintendents were viewed as non-problematic and "neutral assessments of the truth" (Blount, 1995, p. 1), research on women's perspectives of the superintendency has recently begun to appear in the literature (see, for example, Beekley, 1994; Bell, 1988, 1995; Bell & Chase, 1993; Brunner, 1997; Chase, 1995; Grogan, 1996; Holliman, 1996; Tallerico, Burstyn, & Poole, 1993). These initial studies have offered tantalizing glimpses of women's lives in the chief school executive's role. As one of the participants in Holliman's (1996) study of women superintendents in Texas put it, "Be careful what you pray for; the job will take it toll" (p. 321). This research on women's experiences with the conflicted and political role of the superintendent from the perspectives of women themselves, though, is still in its beginning stages. To illustrate this point, Tallerico, Burstyn, and Poole (1993) concluded from their study of women who had voluntarily exited the superintendency that "gender and politics intersect in a system of relationships and power so rich and entangled that we have only begun to explore them" (p 30).

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore part of that intersection of gender and politics. Specifically, I explore the ways in which gender structures conflict between women superintendents and members of their elected boards of trustees—from the perspectives of three female former superintendents. The first section of the paper describes the theoretical framework in which the research is grounded. In this first section, I summarize relevant research in two areas—women in educational administration and the micropolitics of education—and then briefly discuss the study design. The second, and major portion of the paper is devoted to the study findings about the ways in which gender structures conflict between women superintendents and their boards at three levels—individual, community, and society.

Theoretical Framework

To better understand the ways in which gender structures conflict in the public school superintendency, some background knowledge of two key areas in the research literature, women in the superintendency and the micropolitics of education, is essential. The existing knowledge base in these two areas helps shed light on women's experiences in the superintendency and on the intersection of gender and politics that Tallerico, Burstyn, and Poole (1993) described.

Women in the Superintendency

A review of the literature about women in school administration in general, and the superintendency in particular, reveals that the situation for women superintendents has not improved noticeably in the past 40 years. In 1992, 6.6 percent of superintendents in American public schools were female, a figure virtually unchanged from 6.7 percent in 1952 (Glass, 1992). While these numbers, in and of themselves, make strong statement, when they are looked at in the context of the workforce from when superintendents come, the continued underrepresentation of women in the superintendency is even more powerfully clear. Nationwide, 74.4 percent of

public school teachers are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, p. 79). Thus, education as a profession selects 93.4 percent of its chief executives from the 25.6 percent of the workforce that is male. Numerous researchers have theorized the reasons behind these numbers (see, for example, Adkinson, 1981; Bell & Chase, 1993; Estler, 1975; Lynch, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1987). A variety of explanations, including women's socialization, organizational structures, and sociocultural factors have been used to account for women's continued exclusion from the field.

Unfortunately, as Bell (1988), Blackmore (1989), Blount (1995), Scheurich (1995), Shakeshaft (1987), and others point out, the majority of the research in the field has been done from positivist, androcentric paradigms centered in the universality of male experience. Thus, until recently, research on women's experiences in the superintendency—feminist research "designed for women . . . to provide explanations of social phenomena that they want and need, rather than providing answers for questions . . . that have arisen from the desires to pacify, control, exploit, or manipulate women" (Harding, 1987, p. 6) has been absent from the literature. Within the past decade, fortunately, studies designed to include women's perspectives about their own experiences in the public school superintendency have begun to appear in the literature. As more such studies accumulate, researchers and practitioners should move toward a better understanding of women's work lives as superintendents.

Micropolitics

A second area of the research literature that has relevancy for this paper's discussion of gendered conflict in the superintendency is the politics of education, specifically, the micropolitics of the superintendency. The notion that the superintendency is a political venture is one that many people, including some superintendents, find distasteful. Among the reasons

for this distaste is the belief that education is for children, and, as such, is too important and sacred a function to be mixed up in politics (Blumberg, 1985). In reality, however, according to Hord (1990), "Environmental conditions have pressed the superintendent more and more toward adoption of a political role" (p. 2). Thus, the superintendent, as chief executive officer of a school system, operates squarely in the middle of an intensely political system, as Malen (1995) points out: "Schools are mini political systems, nested in multi-level governmental structures, charged with salient public service responsibilities, and dependent on diverse constituencies" (p 148).

This view of schools as mini political systems and the terminology micropolitics of education have emerged in clearly articulated form in the research literature within the past thirty years (Marshall & Scribner, 1991). The term micropolitics has been defined by Malen (1995) as "the overt and covert processes through which individuals and groups in an organization's immediate environment acquire and exercise power to promote and protect their interests" (p. 147). Similarly, Blase (1991) views micropolitics as how people use power to influence other and protect themselves, how people compete to get what they want, how people cooperate, and what people have strong feelings about. Further, Scribner, Reyes, and Fusarelli (1995) use a game analogy to describe the same concepts: "The politics of education . . . seeks to provide avenues for exploring who plays the game, why and how it is played, and who wins and loses" (p. 207).

The ability to clearly understand the ways in which the micropolitics involved in the office of the superintendency operate to create these winners and losers would seem to be one of the key attributes necessary for superintendent success. Burbank (1968) illustrates this point:

> Only a small percentage of school superintendents lose their jobs because of inept budgeting, pupil accounting, [or] building planning. . . . The majority fail because they lack, and cannot seem to acquire, the skill to deal adequately with the human element—board members, teacher, citizens, and pupils. (p. vii)

Thus, superintendents, who are in the position to make many more enemies than friends and who are dependent for survival on ever-changing boards of trustees, must attend to the micropolitical goings-on in their districts.

Study Design

The study on which this paper is based was designed to build on the existing research base about women in the superintendency and micropolitics that was summarized in the previous section. Specifically, I sought in my research to move toward a more informed understanding of women's work lives as superintendents, particularly in politically problematic work situations.

Therefore, a qualitative case-study approach was used to examine in-depth the experiences of three women who had been public school superintendents. The study had three features specifically designed to research women superintendents' perceptions of their experiences in a participatory way that would transcend surface-level conversation about gender's operation in these women's work lives. First, because I sought, in part, to "effectively understand and counter the dominant ideology at work in school" (Giroux, 1988), I selected participants who were no longer practicing superintendents. I assumed that their voluntary exit from the superintendency would provide both psychological distance and a relative sense of safety for the women participants in the study. Second, the study data were collected through a series of in-depth interviews, two with each participant individually followed by a focus group interview with all three participants. These repeated and prolonged conversations were designed

to elicit from the women participant descriptions of their experience in the superintendency that went deeper than surface-level interaction. Third, an interactive-relational approach, as described by Chirban (1996), was used for the individual interviews. This interview technique was chosen because it purposively creates a relationship between the interviewer and the participants and allows for a collaborative space in which all involved can reach a less distorted way of knowing (Lather, 1987) than that produced by traditional interviewing techniques.

Findings

A complete discussion of the findings that resulted from the study described in the previous section is not possible in this relatively brief paper. A specific portion of the study findings, however, about the ways in which gender operates to structure conflict between female superintendents and members of their boards of trustees is addressed in this part of the paper. I organize the discussion around three levels at which gendered conflict in the superintendency seemed to operate in my participants' stories—individual, community, and society. This three-tiered framework for the discussion of my findings was adapted from Scheurich and Young's approach (1997) to explicating racism in research epistemologies; in addition, this structure parallels Beekley's (1994) findings from her research with four women who had exited the superintendency: "They faced cultural, organizational, and personal problems which limited their successful functioning in the superintendency" (p. 137).

Individual Level

In dealing with individual board members in conflictual situations, the women study participants described three different ways in which gender seemed to structure the conflicts. First, they described how, at an interpersonal level, board members seemed to be uncomfortable confronting these superintendents with difficult issues because the superintendents were women.

Second, the interviewees talked about bullying language and tactics used by board members that, again, the study participants attributed to their own femaleness. A third way in which gender seemed to structure conflict between superintendents and boards at the individual level was the expectation of board members that the women superintendents would be easy to manipulate. These three areas are discussed below.

Uncomfortable confrontations. Leslie Conrad (all participants' names are pseudonyms) described conversations she had with some of her board members toward the end of the superintendency she exited as extremely uncomfortable, and she attributed her board members' discomfort to her femaleness:

> They'd come in. Their hands in their pockets. . . . It almost made me chuckle when they'd come in because they wouldn't come in independently to visit with me about a concern. It would be two-by-two. It's like they had to have some kind of support. And that indicated to me they were very uncomfortable in dealing with me one-on-one. . . I feel like it was because I was a woman. They were not comfortable in sitting down and being hard-nosed with me. They just didn't want to be up-front about things.

For Dr. Conrad, it seemed that these male board members found it extremely difficult to "get tough" with the superintendent because she was a woman. Similarly, Amanda Hunter said, "I think they [board members] really think a female is going to be more emotional." In another interview she described a board member who "ran around the district telling lies" about her but who refused to look her in the eye, call her by her name, or deal with her directly in person. She said, "He referred to me as 'that woman' from the moment he came on the board."

Bullying behavior. In stark contrast to the pseudo-chivalrous behavior described above; that is, board members whose behavior indicated that they found it difficult to confront these

women superintendents, Amanda Hunter had other board members who engaged in bullying behavior. She attributed this to the fact that they saw her first as a female, then as a superintendent. She said, "Two of those newer board members called me personally, and I've never been talked to like that in my whole life—they wouldn't have done that to a man. They called me names . . . they thought they could do that to a woman because they are bigger and know all those words." The other two study participants reported similar experiences, including being verbally "chastised" and "told to keep my mouth shut" by members of their boards.

Manipulative expectations. In addition to describing bullying behavior on the part of several board members, Amanda Hunter also talked about her view that some of her board members thought, initially, that she would be easy to control because of her femaleness:

> They [board members] are going to say the right things, but what they, deep down inside, feel and, over the long haul, how they act is totally different. I know that I was looked at when I went into the position [as] "She's cute. She'll do what we tell her to do.

Similarly, Emma Wilburn, another study participant, said, "I think some people originally wanted me in that role because I would do what I was told because I was a woman." The interviewees' descriptions of their board members' perceptions of them as being controllable based on their femaleness were consistent with the experiences of participants in other studies of women superintendents. For example, a woman superintendent interviewed in Tallerico and Burstyn's (1996) study reported that her board hired her because "the board felt that they could manipulate a woman more easily than they could manipulate a man" (p. 653).

Paradoxically, when the superintendencies of the women I interviewed became politically problematic, their board member's expectations that these women would be easily controlled were not met. Emma Wilburn described the irony this way:

> I was perceived as weak because I was not loud. I was not a screamer, which both of my predecessors were. . . . But, I stood up to the board, and I never let things slide. Someone who is consistent is far more terrifying in the long run than someone who is always in a tiff but who has not done the homework.

In much the same way, Amanda Hunter, in talking about the same board member she described earlier who would not look her in the eye, said, "I'd get into executive session and just tear him up. I'd catch him in one lie after another."

Community Level

Additional manifestations of gender's role in structuring conflict with board members were described by the participants as operating at the community level. While the boards that hired these women may have been able to support the hiring of a female superintendent, supporting the actions of the women over the long run seemed to be a different matter. My findings in this area are similar to what Beekley (1994) found—for a variety of very complex reasons, it may be difficult for board members to visibly, publicly support and intervene with the community on behalf of the superintendent when she is female. As Beekley put it, "[It is] unclear as to where the board members did not know what to do, or did not see that as their job" (136). My study participants talked about two different, but closely related, themes in this area. I call the first theme "leading change" and the second "speaking out." Both these themes have to do with inconsistent support from board members at the community level for actions taken the study participants took in their roles as superintendents.

Leading change. All three of the study participants reported that their strengths as instructional leaders were primary factors in their selections as superintendents. Thus, their boards of trustees consciously selected superintendents based on perceived needs to improve the

instructional programs and student performance in these districts. Improvement, however, necessarily comes about through change. The women superintendents in this study, then, were hired to be change agents. Leslie Hunter described what she saw as the role gender plays in the conflict that develops when changes are made that disrupt the status quo in school districts:

> Any kind of change is going to be difficult. But it's even more difficult, I think, when you bring in a woman to initiate that change. . . . You don't have the support [from the board] to make the change that you were hired for originally. So it just creates real conflict.

Emma Wilburn talked also talked about the change process in her district and described feeling as if she were "out in front" of a board that was supporting her privately in executive session but not taking the lead publicly.

> We had a lot of dialog on how fast we could push [change], but, as a board, because of the politics in town, they weren't willing to stand up sometimes. And they took the path of least resistance, and, to them, they thought that would be playing the political game correctly. And, in hindsight, that was not the best. . . . If they had stood up more and said, "This is what we need," and if they had been the public figures speaking out instead of me, they had the credibility with the community that I didn't have.

In a different interview, Dr. Wilburn talked about how board members, in "playing the political" game with the community, may not know how to deal with issues that are raised about the superintendent's femaleness. She said,

> I think the board that hires a female . . . is more likely to have to defend that and not necessarily be prepared to defend it in a way that they're comfortable with in their environment. . . . [When criticism is] aimed at the superintendent because they're female,

> when the issue really has nothing to do with being female, [board members] don't know how quite how to bring that back—how to respond to someone [they've] known all their life. They may get sucked in.

Speaking out. Another factor that two of the study participants described as having precipitated the deterioration of relations with their boards of trustees was their speaking out publicly as superintendents against powerful interest groups in their communities. Although both women said that they were representing the best interests of the district when they spoke, and were, in fact, following the board's directives, when controversy arose, both boards failed to support their superintendents. The following quote from Amanda Hunter is illustrative of numerous examples of this type behavior by board members:

> At one point the board asked me to go and share statistics at tax time [with another governmental agency]. . . . I was very pointed with what I said as far as what was happening to our tax base and the cost of educating children. . . . Those things that I said were from the board . . . but when I left there, it was me that had said that. I had two board members that said, "We never said any of those things. She went there and said that on her own." They started a lot of trouble for me. Just with that, the fact that they didn't back up what was said.

At another interview in talking about lack of public support from her board members, this same participant said, "I think gender was a huge part of it. . . . They would never, in a million years, have replaced me with another woman."

Leslie Conrad, similarly, described conflict that emerged from her board members' discomfort with her outspokenness as a woman. She said, "The school board really didn't want me to testify [in a lawsuit]. . . . I went and testified about my opinion as an educational leader . . .

then I was chastised about that at school board meetings." In a later interview, Dr. Conrad talked more about her view that being female negatively influenced the perceptions of communication as a school leader: "I was not a match for the district . . . I think a man was going to be more well received because those in power were men. . . . So, they really needed a man."

Societal Level

In addition to the roles that gender played at the individual and community levels in structuring conflict between the women superintendents and their school boards, the participants also talked about awareness at a deeper level that some of what they experienced was structured into the very fabric of society. As Leslie Conrad put it, "I don't think they [board members] were really aware of it [sexist behavior] at all. It's just so in-grained and so habitual that it wasn't anything exceptional to them. It's just a matter of their life story unfolding." The study participants' views in this area supported previous researchers' (see, for example, Adkinson, 1981; Bell, 1988; Estler, 1975; Lynch, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1987) findings about societal factors' role in perpetuating the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership roles. Gender bias, sex-role stereotyping, and discriminatory attitudes permeate the larger culture and, therefore, inevitably are present in all aspects of schooling, including board-superintendent relations, as Rizvi (1993) pointed out: "Gender and race are not issues external to the processes of schooling . . . Rather, they are factors which are constitutive of curricular, pedagogic, and administrative relations in schools" (p. 215).

Emma Wilburn saw these societal factors as having especially strong explanatory power for women's experiences in the superintendency. She talked about the intersection of gender with other societal factors, specifically the lack of societal agreement on what should be the aims of education:

> I think that a woman going into a traditional male industry that's got a much clearer purpose, if you will, and definition probably has an easier time than somebody going into education. . . . If you are going to run a major corporation that's got a profit line, . . . the bottom line purpose is real clear. If her style is female or whatever; if she could achieve that [profit] then people can accept it and live with it. When you get in education, we're not even clear on our purpose, so when you start running into turbulence, rough spots, people just do not know. . . . Are we dealing with what education is about? Or how we are going to do this? Are we dealing with a woman and what she's doing? To move into a leadership role in education at this time as a man is difficult because of all the issues, but then you throw on top of that "woman" . . . In all honesty people don't know what the problem is; they can't figure out if it's her or what it is.

Discussion and Conclusion

All three study participants described similar scenarios in their school districts. They were selected or appointed by school board members who had progressive attitudes and who sought instructional leadership for their schools. As the superintendents moved into their roles and began making changes, they disrupted the status quo of their districts. Opposition arose from old-time staff members who had been in positions of power under the old system. Through time, candidates supported by disgruntled employees and other groups at odds with the superintendent replaced the board members who had hired the women superintendents. The new board members, through a variety of tactics, created a situation that was unbearable for the superintendent, who reached a financial settlement with the district, and moved on. These situations the study participants described appeared to confirm Iannoccone and Lutz's (1995)

Dissatisfaction Theory that describes how superintendents who become perceived as out-of-synch with their communities become undermined and, eventually, removed.

The participants in the current study described gender as a factor in all stages of the evolution of their experiences. However, gender apparently became increasingly likely to be used as a weapon against the superintendent as the situation became more problematic. As Amanda Hunter described it, after four years of a successful superintendency, "I woke up one morning, and I was 'that woman' to everybody." All three study participants said that gender operated at personal, community, and societal levels with their board members and made it difficult for these board members to support the actions of their female superintendents, particularly when those actions were to implement change or when they were controversial.

Given the apparent amount of friction that gender seemed to generate between these superintendents and their boards, I wondered if any of the study participants had raised the issue directly with their boards, or, if they had not, if they thought it might have been productive to do so. When asked, none of the women said they had talked to board members directly about gender-related issues. As Leslie Conrad put it, "We talked about things as if gender were not involved." As for their perceptions of the possibilities for dealing with the gender issue directly with boards, the study participants were skeptical. According to Dr. Conrad, "Maybe it would have been helpful to bring that (gender) up. I don't know if it would have. I have no sense for how that would have gone." Similarly, Amanda Hunter said, "I can't think of many [boards] that are ready [to deal with the gender issue.] I can't imagine many boards are going to look at it."

Clearly, board-superintendent relations, specifically dealing with gender issues, is an area in which considerable work in both research and practice needs to be done. The cost in terms of pure human talent that is being wasted when 75.6 percent of the workforce of the education

industry is virtually eliminated from the top leadership role simply on the basis of femaleness is staggering. As school board members are the people who must hire, work with, and support superintendents, the relations between women superintendents and board members are key factors in producing meaningful change in both the numbers of women in the superintendency and the quality of the work lives of those women.

Therefore, those who research, train, and work with superintendents and school boards must become involved in crafting solutions to the persistent problems that this paper and the work of other researchers have identified. It is past time for those involved in educational administration at all levels to stop "perpetuat[ing] functionalist paradigms with heavy management/control perspectives [that are] incapable of capturing the sense-making process of social actors" (Anderson, 1990, p. 38).

All three female superintendents who participated in the study on which this paper is based said that they did not consciously pay attention to the role gender played in their work lives while they were still in those roles. Amanda Hunter summed up the perspective of all three women by saying, "I want to be better than that. I wanted to get past the gender issue. But you never do with some people." The participants all said, too, that they had had no training anywhere in their university preparation programs for dealing with gender-related issues. As, Emma Wilbur said, succinctly, "It was never discussed." Leslie Conrad even said that she felt her lack of awareness and lack of training about gender's role in educational administration "made a significant difference in my career."

Similarly, the study participants said that gender-related issues were never discussed with their school boards. Presumably, their board members had had no training about these issues, either. It would seem that a logical question to pose at this point would be, "Why not?" If, as

this paper clearly shows, gender was a factor, a significant factor, in board–superintendent relations in the study participants' districts, why did no one talk about or work with these groups on gender issues anywhere in their careers? The implications here for university preparation programs, researchers, and those who provide school board training, including school board associations, should be clear. The members of the organizations and institutions of educational administration must work toward articulating the heretofore unspoken and making visible the invisible (Anderson, 1994; Scheurich, 1994) with respect to the operation of gender in superintendent-board relations so that we can all work openly toward solutions. Therefore, I hope that the experiences of the three women superintendents who were participants in my research, by serving as "dangerous memory" (Welch, 1990), will inspire those in the educational administration profession to work toward these solutions. That is, I hope that these women's experiences with gendered conflict in the superintendency, which have been preserved through this research, will serve to prod our collective consciences and, thus, remind us to that much remains to be done.

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